The New York Times C-25
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By Christopher Lehmann-Haupt

VEIL: The Secret Wars of the CIA 1981-1987. By Bob Woodward. Illustrated. 543 pages. Simon & Schuster. $21.95.

AMONG the many newsworthy stories in Bob Woodward's highly revealing new book, "Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA 1981-1987," the biggest headlines seem to have been grabbed by the deathbed scene at the end, in which the author describes how he walked into a guarded hospital room and got the dying Director of Central Intelligence, William J. Casey, to admit with a nod that yes, he knew about the "contra diversion," meaning, one assumes, the use of profits from the sale of arms to Iran to finance the activities of contra rebels fighting the Sandinista Government in Nicaragua.

But despite the headlines, this story seems almost irrelevant in the context of Mr. Woodward's 500-page book — a mere grace note, or, more accurately, a mere clumsy note, considering how vague the story seems in the telling, how lacking in the sort of vital detail that would have made it plausible. For one thing, at this late point in the book it appears self-evident that the C.I.A. Director knew of the "contra diversion."

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For another thing, there appear to be more important assertions in the book, most of them having to do with the extent of the C.I.A.'s illegal covert activities under the leadership of Mr. Casey. Finally, making headlines is not primarily what "Veil" is about; its purpose is instead to detail how Mr. Casey shaped the C.I.A. during the six years of his directorship, and how the results were seen from his own perspective, that of the White House and that of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

In fact, if "Veil" has a major flaw, it relates to the author's self-effacement about what is newsworthy in its pages. There is no attempt to call attention to what has never been revealed before. Events that will prove familiar to most readers are woven seamlessly into unfamiliar events, and, except for the two dozen or so extraordinary declarations — like the author's assertion that Bashir Gamayel, the assassinated Lebanese President, and José Napoleón Duarte, the President of El Salvador, served as C.I.A. "assets," or his report that "a small part" of Claire Sterling's book "The Terror Network," which so aroused the C.I.A. to the threat of terrorism in 1981, had come from "an old, small-scale CIA covert propaganda operation" — it requires a consummately well-informed reader to distinguish what is news from what is already in the public record.

As well as not calling attention to its newsworthiness, Mr. Woodward's text seems morally neutral about much of what it reports, as if he had taken as his motto an observation made in 1982 by his colleague at The Washington Post, Benjamin C. Bradlee, the executive editor, that "this is Reagan's government now . . . and the presumption is no longer that the airing of CIA secrets is automatically good. It could be bad."

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Add to this neutrality of tone a lack of shape in the narrative structure that no doubt results from the author's closeness to the events he is reporting — "Accordingly," he writes, "this book is much closer to journalism than to history, particularly as the Iran-contra hearings and the various investigations continue" — and what you end up with falls short of the most exciting books Mr. Woodward has had a hand in, particularly "The Final Days," co-written with Carl Bernstein, and the book on the Supreme Court "The Brethren," which was written with Scott Armstrong.

Still, "Veil" is not so morally neutral or lacking in narrative punch that it doesn't make its point. Take a man like Mr. Casey, a veteran of the Office of Strategic Services who worshiped his chief, William (Wild Bill) Donovan, the founder of the C.I.A.'s forerunner as an intelligence agency. Put him in charge of an organization that was demoralized by the experience of the Iran hostage crisis under President Jimmy Carter. Give him leaders who encouraged his fondness for covert action and his well-developed tendency to see the world as "them" against "us." And you have a situation where it would have been difficult for the C.I.A. not to "go out of control," as one observer put it.

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Is Mr. Woodward wholly credible in the account he presents? It's true that one has to take a great deal on faith, and that it seems puzzling that a director of the C.I.A. would be willing to spend as much time talking to a reporter as Mr. Woodward asserts Mr. Casey did. Aside from citing Mr. Casey, Mr. Woodward identifies few of the 250 people he talked to for this book, and none of the 100 or so with whom he held multiple interviews. Moreover, his use of quotation marks even for remarks not precisely recalled or documented is not reassuring.

On the other hand, his book is all of a piece; whatever is new seems to follow from and be consistent with whatever is in the public record or familiar. Some of the material he digs up is confirmed within the book, in reports of direct interviews with the principals or as unchallenged stories that ran in The Washington Post and other news media.

And there is Mr. Woodward's previous record to consider. To date, no one has come forward to knock major holes in any of the previous books he has been involved with, and two of them, "The Final Days" and "The Brethren," contained much unsourced material similar to that in the present book. Finally, most of the narrative in "Veil" has the feel of veracity. Except perhaps for that final deathbed scene. And by the time you get to that, it seems relatively inconsequential.